

RCIA: The Thread in the Tapestry of Parish Renewal

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In November 2001, the diocese of Tyler, Texas, set out to strengthen the Christian initiation process. The plan did not look at initiating and receiving people into the Church as a separate process in a parish. Rather, Christian initiation began to be viewed as one of three threads on which parishes should focus time, energy, resources, and prayer. The other threads to be woven into the tapestry of parish life were to be liturgical renewal, and the call to holiness and discipleship.

When Bishop Alvaro Corrada, SJ put forth this vision for renewal for the twenty-first century, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults had been established in about third of the 69 parishes and missions in the diocese. With this renewal, the RCIA would be expanded to include lapsed Catholics and immigrants, who are both catechized and uncatechized Catholics, and people new to the community. Soon we saw that the Christian initiation thread strengthened to become a rope, which became a tool for evangelization. The evangelization aimed to initiate individuals into the sacramental life of the Church while integrating them into the life of the parish community.

The Present

Just a few years after this process was begun, Christian initiation is interwoven in the fabric of nearly all of the parishes and missions of the diocese that spans 22,000 square miles and 33 counties. By 2004, the number of individuals initiated or received into the Church doubled. Prior

to then, the diocese averaged 200 people each year who became new Catholics. In 2007, members of 44 parishes attended the Rite of Election to present the elect or those seeking full communion with the Church. In 2008, 60 of the parishes and missions of this rural diocese were implementing the process at some level. The number of people that were initiated or received into the Church in the diocese doubled.

The Structure

A trained and formed diocesan team brainstormed, prayed, and identified the key elements that affect all aspects of parish life: liturgical, organizational, spiritual, and catechetical. After the diocesan team's year of formation, parish teams were formed and trained. The training process took place in three phases, with each phase comprising a series of days. Today, an annual in-service day for Christian initiation teams is utilized to provide maintenance for the process.

Resources

A diocesan manual was created and issued to each parish undergoing training. In that manual are the resources available from publishers for the stages of the RCIA and for ongoing formation during mystagogy. The Office of Faith Formation maintains an Audio-Visual Resource Library that keeps materials current for all aspects of faith formation. The library, our handbooks, and explanation of our processes are available online at www.dioceseoftyler.org. Among the resources that parishes have found to be beneficial are Journey of Faith, Foundations of Faith, Invitation, Exploring the Teachings of Christ, God Calls You By Name, Fr. Cleo Schmenk Mystagogy Series and Apprenticing the Catholic Way of Life, by Jerry Galipeau, <sc>dmin<xc>. Ongoing formation following mystagogy is a priority and resources used for this

time include Celebrating the Lectionary, the What Catholics Believe Series, Faith Formation for Adults (Blest Are We), Growing Faith Project, Making Disciples (Our Sunday Visitor), Feasts of Faith (Crossroads Ministries), Seasons of Faith, and Catholic Update Video series, and RCL's Echoes of Faith Theology Series. These are some of the more frequently used resources. We encourage teams to be open to a variety of resources. Since year-round is the recommended norm, much of our catechesis becomes individualized instruction in addition to the community development.

All of our materials and our formation is presented in both English and Spanish. If a parish has a large percentage of Spanish-speaking people in the area, a separate Spanish Christian initiation team is formed to work collaboratively with the English team. The one process, then, is available in more than one language, if necessary.

The Curriculum

For all ages throughout the diocese, catechesis is based on 15 doctrinal tenets of the faith. Since lifelong formation is a priority for all faith formation, mystagogical formation is the natural step following full reception into the Church for individuals in this process. Among these goals are Recognize God as Trinity; Present an understanding of the human need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ based revelation and faith; and exercise responsibility as caretakers of creation as an expression of our relationship with Jesus Christ .All of the goals can be found on the diocesan web site.

Year-Round is the Norm

Year-round initiation is the norm for all parishes. While the focus is more on year-round inquiry

rather than the year-round catechumenate, individuals are paired with mentors who can meet with them regularly. Catechetical sessions are based on the 15 goals in a cycle; therefore, when an individual comes into the process he/she enters at their level of faith and continue until they have completed a full cycle or sometimes more than one. We also stress that we are not initiating individuals but families, even if families are not coming into the Church as a group, the formation and nurturing attempts to reach out to the families of the inquirer. This has proven beneficial both to the individual and to the movement in the diocese toward whole community catechesis and nurturing holiness in every household. Catechetical sessions are flexible and creative, using a variety of technology.

The Tapestry

How has this thread woven a tapestry for parish renewal? As parish teams developed, mentoring flourished, networking blossomed, and the need for adult faith formation surged. When this occurred, several areas of parish life changed. Renewal, growth, maturity, commitment, discipleship, and holiness were all by-products of this Christian initiation process. The following parish and diocesan changes were direct results of the success of this process:

1. Canonical Advocates

Teams indicated a need for understanding the Tribunal process for marriage cases. The end result was a series of semesters devoted to training Canonical Advocates for this ministry. In December 2007, Bishop Corrada commissioned 17 advocates.

2. Restoration of Confirmation

The diocesan team found concerns that there existed a duality of the theology of initiation--one for cradle Catholics and one for those being initiated into the Church through the RCIA. The end result was a restoration of the order. Confirmation is to be celebrated prior to First Eucharist. We are in our third year of this restoration and doing remarkably well.

3. Quinceanera Guidelines

With a 40 percent Hispanic population, Quinceaneras had become opportunities to send individuals through sacramental hoops in order to celebrate this event in their lives. The initiation process surfaced that this was a misuse of sacramental formation. The end result provided diocesan Guidelines for Quinceaneras that identify the ritual as a sacramental and an event for evangelization. Therefore, included in the guidelines are some clarifications of controversial points, including whether the individual seeking to celebrate the quinceanera needs to be Catholic and registered in a parish. Formation was designed for each situation and parish teams were created to coordinate these celebrations. Many individuals and entire families, in some cases, have found their home in the Catholic Church through this event.

4. Whole Community Catechesis

Families and households became the focus for initiation. Coupled with the restoration of Confirmation, whole community catechesis took on momentum. Today, more than half of our parishes are utilizing many aspects of whole-community catechesis and moving in this direction with great success.

5. To Lead As Jesus Did--Leadership Formation Seminar

340 individuals have participated in leadership training during the last 12 months in response to a need to train leaders on Christian initiation teams.

6. Parish as the Initiating Community

One of the most positive effects I have witnessed over the last six years is a change in language. All the members of a parish are now taking responsibility for the RCIA process. No longer are the catechumens and candidates referred to "the RCIA team's people." The mantra is now "these are new members of our family, the body of Christ." The parish community has become the initiating vehicle as the candidates and catechumens are apprenticed into the Catholic way of life.

7. Where have all our neophytes gone?

In 2006, our diocese did a study using questions based on Jerry Galipeau's recent thesis regarding neophytes and their current status in the Church. We evaluated the years from 2002-2006. The results were overwhelmingly positive. Seventy-five percent are very involved in their communities. We received feedback from 22 parishes and 506 individuals. Among the feedback on how the process changed their lives were the following:

- 1.life has become more prayerful
- 2.family catechesis has become a priority

- 3.lives have changed dramatically
- 4.interested in ongoing faith formation
- 5.less judging, more peaceful, more forgiving, more joyful
- 6.recognized that the church has helped them in their personal and professional lives
- 7.hungry to be involved in ministry

What has made this process successful? The single most important piece in the success of this process is capable leadership and the driving force behind the vision--the bishop. The right people coming together with the talents, gifts, and skills to implement this are crucial. Is the tapestry ever finished? Never. . . it is organic, living, nurtured by liturgical renewal, supported by discipleship and personal holiness. This tapestry is strongly tied together to form the framework for the new evangelization of East Texas which puts every individual into relationship with the living Christ. (*published in the Catechumenate Journal in March, 2009*)



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